

# What Is Autism?

## Asperger's Syndrome - Symptoms

Although there are many possible symptoms of Asperger's syndrome, the main symptom is significant trouble with social situations. Your child may have mild to severe symptoms or have a few or many of these symptoms. Because of the wide variety of symptoms, no two children with Asperger's are alike.

### Symptoms during childhood

Although the cause of autism is not known, many researchers believe genetics is responsible for 90% of the risk of a child developing autism. Rare cases may be caused by chemical exposure and other agents that can cause birth defects. Don't take drugs during pregnancy unless your doctor says it's OK. This is particularly true for some seizure medications. And do not drink alcoholic beverages of any kind while you are pregnant.

Parents often first notice the symptoms of Asperger's syndrome when their child starts preschool and begins to interact with other children. Children with Asperger's syndrome may:

- Not pick up on social cues and may lack inborn social skills, such as being able to read others' body language, start or maintain a conversation, and take turns talking.

- Dislike any changes in routines.

- Appear to lack empathy.

- Be unable to recognize subtle differences in speech tone, pitch, and accent that alter the meaning of others' speech. So your child may not understand a joke or may take a sarcastic comment literally. And his or her speech may be flat and hard to understand because it lacks tone, pitch, and accent.

- Have a formal style of speaking that is advanced for his or her age. For example, the child may use the word "beckon" instead of "call" or the word "return" instead of "come back."

- Avoid eye contact or stare at others.

- Have unusual facial expressions or postures.

- Be preoccupied with only one or few interests, which he or she may be very knowledgeable about. Many children with Asperger's syndrome are overly interested in parts of a whole or in unusual activities, such as designing houses, drawing highly detailed scenes, or studying astronomy. They may show an unusual interest in certain topics such as snakes, names of stars, or dinosaurs.

- Talk a lot, usually about a favorite subject. One-sided conversations are common. Internal thoughts are often verbalized.

- Have delayed motor development. Your child may be late in learning to use a fork or spoon, ride a bike, or catch a ball. He or she may have an awkward walk. Handwriting is often poor.

- Have heightened sensitivity and become overstimulated by loud noises, lights, or strong tastes or textures.

For more information about these symptoms, see sensory integration dysfunction.

A child with one or two of these symptoms does not necessarily have Asperger's syndrome. To be diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, a child must have a combination of these symptoms and significant trouble with social situations.

Although the condition is in some ways similar to autism, a child with Asperger's syndrome typically has normal language and intellectual development. Also, those with Asperger's syndrome typically make more of an effort than those with autism to make friends and engage in activities with others.

## Symptoms during adolescent and teen years

Most symptoms persist through the teen years. And although teens with Asperger's can begin to learn those social skills they lack, communication often remains difficult. They will probably continue to have difficulty "reading" others' behavior.

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Your teen with Asperger's syndrome (like other teens) will want friends but may feel shy or intimidated when approaching other teens. He or she may feel "different" from others. Although most teens place emphasis on being and looking "cool," teens with Asperger's may find it frustrating and emotionally draining to try to fit in. They may be immature for their age and be naive and too trusting, which can lead to teasing and bullying.

All of these difficulties can cause teens with Asperger's to become withdrawn and socially isolated and to have depression or anxiety.<sup>2</sup>

But some teens with Asperger's syndrome are able to make and keep a few close friends through the school years. Some of the classic Asperger's traits may also work to the benefit of your teen. Teens with Asperger's are typically uninterested in following social norms, fads, or conventional thinking, allowing creative thinking and the pursuit of original interests and goals. Their preference for rules and honesty may lead them to excel in the classroom and as citizens.

## Symptoms in adulthood

Asperger's syndrome is a lifelong condition, although it tends to stabilize over time, and improvements are often seen. Adults usually have a better understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses. They are able to learn social skills, including how to read others' social cues. Many people with Asperger's syndrome marry and have children.

Some traits that are typical of Asperger's syndrome, such as attention to detail and focused interests, can increase chances of university and career success. Many people with Asperger's seem to be fascinated with technology, and a common career choice is engineering. But scientific careers are by no means the only areas where people with Asperger's excel. Indeed, many respected historical figures have had symptoms of Asperger's, including Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Albert Einstein, Marie Curie, and Thomas Jefferson.

## Other conditions

Many children with Asperger's syndrome also have coexisting conditions and may have symptoms of these conditions also. They include:

- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

- Anxiety disorder.

- Depression, especially in adolescents.

- Nonverbal learning disorder.

- Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).

- Social anxiety disorder.